

# Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1943

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental*

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1942, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

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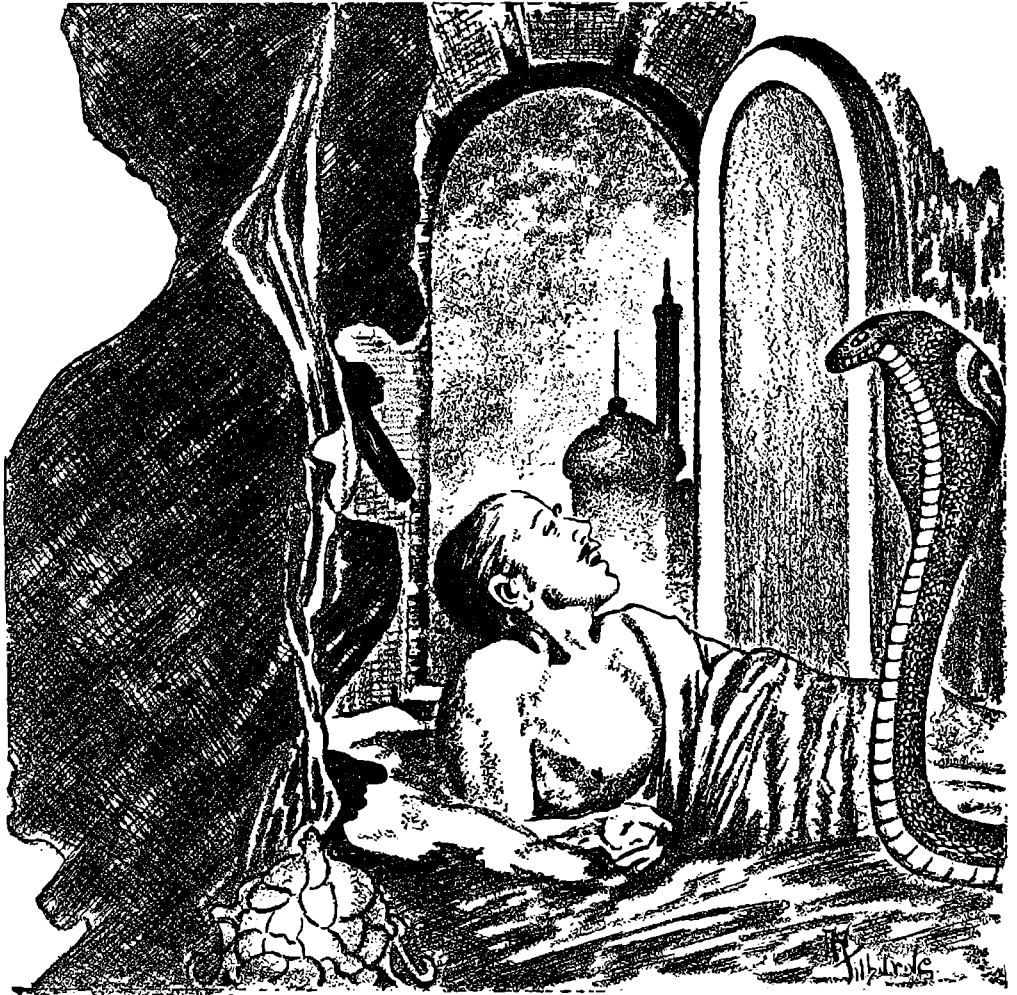
Vol. 36, No. 9

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# Repayment

By SEABURY QUINN



*He thought the dance of the snakes might relieve him of immense boredom . . . and it did.*

I HAD the story from my friend Gans Field whose acquaintanceship among the great, near-great and merely notorious of New York and its environs reads like a combination stone proof of the current issue of Who's Who and the five-star

edition of the Daily Tattler. We were finishing dinner at the Café des Citoyens in East Fifty-seventh Street where the fromage de Brie is always at the precise, perfect point of ripeness, the steamed snails, lightly sautéed in olive oil, as

sweetly tender as the first kiss of young love and the slippery, thirst-annihilating Meursault grateful as a well-spring in the desert.

It was an evening in September, too warm for autumn and too cool for summer, the fitting ending to one of those radiant, vital, sun-swept days that New York knows in early fall, when twilight settles softly, like a lavender curtain dropped from a sky of pure dark amethyst, and blue haze trails across the distant Jersey Palisades like the blue cloak of some proud queen. Dinner had been served in the garden where orange, red and green Chinese lanterns were half hidden among the plane trees' leaves and thick soft grass made a carpet soft as any from the looms of Mosul underfoot. The subdued candle-light fell on the cloth and silver and glass-ware; across the pointed yellow flames I saw the pretty blond hair and gray eyes of Frances Field and her husband's lean, tanned face, his sleekly brushed black hair and the pencil-line of small black mustache. Muted like an echo from the street outside there came the ululating warning of a motor-siren, insistent but soft and musical as an ocarina played in middle register. Frances shivered slightly.

"Cold, dear?" Gans asked. "Perhaps we'd best be going in—"

"No," she denied, and smiled at him the way most men dream some woman will some day smile at them, "it was that motor-siren. It made me think of Dirk Vanderstein, and—"

"Oh, that!" her husband chuckled. "Don't let it get you down, darling. He only got what he asked for. Shoemakers ought to stick to their lasts, and young smart Alocs from Long Island have no business mixing in the rites and ceremonies of the Benni Senoussi."

"The who?" I asked.

Field smiled. He has a most engaging smile that has a tendency to neutralize the

effects of the grim things he sometimes says. "The Benni Senoussi, the dark brotherhood of Berber sorcerers—hereditary magicians, snake charmers and necromancers—that has existed in North Africa since before the fall of Carthage, and flourishes today despite the interdiction of the Moslem *mollahs* and the French and Spanish administrations. The Berbers are not Arab stock, you know. They're a distinct racial group, something like the Basques, and probably pre-Aryan. Outwardly they're Moselmin, but that's a veneer laid on a core of folk-lore that has fire—and serpent-worship for its base. Not pleasant customers to tangle with."

"I should think not. And this friend of yours—Van whatever-his-name-was—how'd he get mixed up with 'em?"

"He wasn't any friend of mine," Field corrected. "I hardly knew the bloke to speak to. But I know all about him—"

"And what's a motor-horn that sounds like an ocarina got to do with it?" I interrupted impolitely. Field and I don't stand on much ceremony with each other.

"Oh, that?" He drew one of the table candles to him and thrust the tip of his cigar into its cone of yellow flame. "H'm-m," as a turban of white smoke came twisting from the cigar and swirled and spiraled round his head like ectoplasm in a spirit-photograph. "That'll take a lot o' telling. Could you stand hearing it again, Fran?"

"I think so," Frances answered hesitatingly, "if—"

"Yes, dear? If—"

"If you'll hold my hand, please. I'll feel safer that way—not imagine dreadful things are slithering across the grass at me."

"Right-o, *yah aini*—O soul of my soul's soul—" agreed her husband who speaks Arabic like a native—of Dixie Land, which he is. "Hang on for dear life. Here goes—"

**D**IRK VANIDERSTEIN, it seemed, had been left about everything his thrifty Dutch ancestors had accumulated since the founding of the Town of Breuckelen in 1646 except their good hard common sense. Born, as the saying goes, with a silver spoon in his mouth, he grew up into a spoiled brat believing there was nothing his money couldn't buy, and encountering no evidence to weaken that opinion between his fifth and thirtieth birthdays. His classmates at the swanky country day school they sent him to fawned on him for his favors, and at prep school he had top place in the stag line and first choice of the girls. He cut in when he wished, but no one ever cut in on him. His father's gift to the athletic fund got him a place on the first team. That was the year Adelphi defeated Shoreham fifty to nothing.

At college it was pretty much the same. If Dirk didn't make Phi Beta Kappa he did make Rho Tau Epsilon, which had a lot more social significance, and to whose chapter house his father gave a completely equipped indoor squash court. When several of the boys blind-dated chorus girls and Dirk found that the femme he'd drawn possessed less charm and beauty than the belle his roommate had he calmly exchanged partners, and his roommate, mindful of the loans he'd made and those he hoped to make in future, registered no complaint. Neither did the girl. She knew which side her bread was buttered on and had the not unusual feminine desire to spread some sugar on the butter.

And so, with his thirtieth birthday just across his shoulder, we find our little scion of Long Island aristocracy orphaned and not grieving much about it, with very much more money than he knew what to do with, and a lifetime of complete unemployment before him. He looked ten years younger than his age. His mouth had grown a little narrower, perhaps, but there were no

lines in his forehead or about his eyes, no marks of victories or defeats. Immense boredom was pressing down on him like a cloud-loaded autumn sky. He was tired of gambling at the race tracks and casinos, wearied to the point of surfeit with the long succession of little gay ladies whose business in life it was to be amusing to rich young men, and so on what might have been called an impulse he went to Algiers for a week.

The week stretched to a fortnight, and the fortnight lengthened to a month, and still he lingered. How he came to take the villa he had no idea, but there he was with a three-month lease upon the place, a corps of native servants and a *chef de cuisine* who was at least three-quarters French, rejoiced exceedingly in the name of Manfroi and made *pâtisserie* which was in its way as much a work of art as are the panes of the Sainte-Chapelle.

At first he was enchanted with it all. He loved the flower-fresh airy silence of the mornings before the sun had come out hot and drowsy. He reveled in the long, sweet, quiet afternoons when over-ripe pomegranates lay like bleeding broken hearts upon the turf-ringed flagstones of the garden paths and sunlight poured a sort of pale liquescent brightness over everything and took on iridescence from the mass of green leafage and brilliant hibiscus flowering riotously everywhere.

But he was not a man to be content with merely contemplating beauty. Perhaps he had a good mind once, but a thing unused tends to deteriorate, and Dirk had never had to use his mind, so he was still a baby overtaken by manhood, and like an infant he knew life and the world only through their impacts on his five senses. So the boredom which he fled caught up with him that evening early in December as he sat on the flat roof of his house and watched the sun go down like a full ball of crimson in a sea of swimming rose while in the

turquoise east a single star showed sharp and bright as newly-minted silver.

"*Yah Sidi*," came the soft, insinuating voice of Othman Nejim his dragoman, "one waits below who craves admission to thy presence. He brings that which he hopes will amuse you—"

"What is it?" Dirk was slightly annoyed at the interruption of his idleness. "A clown with a trained dancing ape, or one of those infernal sand diviners—"

"*Hou!*" laughed the dragoman who had a round and jolly face, a rounder, even jollier belly and a laugh rounder, fatter and jollier than either. "Is it with such trifles I would plague your lordship? I, Othman Nejim? Not so, protector of the fatherless. The one who waits upon thy gracious nod is a snake master, a very prince of snake charmers, a member of the clan and tribe of the accursed Benni Senoussi—on whom be Allah's interdiction!" He cast the imprecation perfunctorily, not as if he meant it, but because it was conventional. "Wilt deign to see him, O munificence?"

"Humph. A snake charmer, eh? I've seen those johnnies in the *Kashbah*. Fakes, ain't they, workin' with fangless snakes?"

"Not this one, *Sidi*. He is of the cursed tribe whose forebears worshiped at the serpent's shrine before the Phophet—*salla 'llābu 'aleyhi wasellum!*—converted them to Islam. 'Tis said the snakes know their blood brethren and will not bite them. However that may be, this fellow uses only deadly serpents from far Hind whose lightest kiss is sharp as the edged sword of the Dark Angel Azrael—"

"Oh, all right. Bring the blighter up. He may me amusin'."

THE "prince of snake charmers" Othman Nejim ushered to the roof was old. And wizened. Beneath the twisted green turban that marked him as a *haji* who had made pilgrimage to Mecca his face was

drawn and almost colorless, with cheekbones standing out so startlingly they seemed almost to pierce the skin. A wisp of graying beard depended from his chin and on his upper lip a straggling line of gray mustache outlined the crooked smile that looked as if it might have been stitched on his mouth with red thread.

"*Es-salaam, yah Sidi*—the salute my lord," he touched breast and lips and forehead in a flickering, almost incredibly quick gesture. "It is thy gracious wish that I have my pets dance before the presence?"

"Can you do tricks with 'em?" Despite himself Dirk's interest was arrested by this strolling mountebank who wore his dignity and dirt with such an air of conscious pride.

"Tricks?" The old man set a pot-bellied basket on the roof tiles. "*Hayah!* Is it not a trick to force the serpents that bear death within their mouths to do my will, *yah Sidi*? What greater trick is there than to hold off the Sunderer of All Companionships and Ender of Delights by the power of the eye and flute, defender of the oppressed?"

"Huh! Want me to believe you haven't had their fangs yanked out?"

"*Rahmet 'Ullah*—the Lord's Compassion! Is they servant a pork-devouring, wine-imbibbing Hindu that he travels with emasculated serpents, *yah abu jood*—O father of munificence? Wait until my pets, my dears, my roses from the garden of the King have danced for thee, defender of the defenseless, then say if their fangs have been drawn or no!"

"Okay. Start goin', feller. I can't wait all night for you to get in the groove."

The scrawny little man flopped down cross-legged on the roof tiles with all the bonelessness of a rag doll. "Attend my voice, O gentle ones; come to my call, ye brides and bridesmaids, ye scented bowers of delight!" He jerked the cord with which the basket lid was fastened and rapped on the wattled lip of the hamper with a

knuckle. His voice dropped to a gentle, wheedling tone. "Come to thy lover, thy bridegroom, O ladies from the harem of the Great King—*hai!*"

Above the basket's open top something had risen like a nervous jack-in-the-box that jerked from sight almost as soon as it inhaled the outside air. Yet in the fleeting fraction of a second that it showed VanIlderstein had seen the glimmer of a pair of little bead-bright eyes, the outlines of a cone-shaped head and the quick flicker of a forked tongue. A chill of sudden vague, indefinite fear went rippling up his spine, beginning at the small of his back and continuing until he felt the short hair on his neck commence to rise and bristle like the hackles of a startled dog. There was a chilled sensation in his forearms, and little pits of goose-flesh dimpled in his skin. The age-old fear of every mammal for the serpent had laid hold on him.

"Oh, hell! Never mind the show to-night, old man. Take your snakes an' run along. I'm not feelin' so good—like to rest—"

"Behold, *yah Sidi!*" The old snake charmer's eyes were on him with a cold and terrible insistence. "The serpents! They come to dance before thy presence, father of perfection!"

Not hurriedly, but with a dreadful, graceful, slow deliberation, flowing effortlessly as water across the smooth rim of the basket came three cobras with the shadows of the dying day reflected in their little, flat, unchanging eyes.

The serpent master thrust a scrawny hand into his dirt-encrusted burnoose and drew out a small instrument that looked like an onion with half a foot of stalk left on it. Along the upper side of the stem was a line of six holes like flute-stops. His eyes were fixed upon the snakes with a fierce, burning steadiness. Dirk shivered at their expression. This was not the look a trainer gives his beasts, the cold, com-

elling gaze of one who bids another do his will. It was the look of one who worships unclean gods as he beholds his deity, who feels himself inspired by the godhead of the being he adores till votary and deity are one in thought and being, one in aim and purpose—and thought and aim and purpose wholly evil.

The music of the pipe was sweet and flutelike, fluctuating from a slender spider-web of high-pitched melody to the soft and throaty murmur of doves busy with their courtship. It was all in minor key, the mourning, sad lament that stamps all Oriental music, yet underneath its sobbing, muted tones there was an intimation of shrill, spiteful laughter.

FOR a long moment the three snakes swayed to and fro as if they sought to find the source of the soft, liquid-flowing notes, then slowly, lazily, their mottled bodies weaving languid andantes across the umber tiles, they slid toward the old piper squatting with his back against the parapet.

Dirk saw the flicker of their lightning-forked, molasses-colored tongues as they slipped out of their coiled watchfulness and crept in slowly melting zigzags toward the musician, and beneath the liquid murmurs of the flute he heard the scratching of their belly-scales against the tiles, like the scuffing of dry leaves that fly before a burst of autumn wind.

They formed a semi-circle round the piper, swaying pointed heads from right to left, from left to right. Now one of them raised half a yard of lichen-colored body from the floor and as it reared itself the hood behind its head expanded slowly, and Dirk saw the spectacle-shaped mark of Brahma on it. A second snake was rising slowly, and the third. Unwillingly they seemed to rise, as though drawn from the floor by some force greater than their sluggish wills, but up and up they stretched until it seemed that almost their full

lengths were off the floor and that they balanced on a scant half-foot of coiled tail.

Faster came the music, rising in a shrill crescendo till its piercing sharpness whipped against the ears like a despairing scream, fluttering and wavering like a cry of eldritch terror, ornamented and embroidered with arpeggios until its melody was lost completely, then once more slipping back into its mournful, sobbing tune.

"Their fangs, *yah Sidi!*" The piper took his flute from his lips for an instant. "Behold their mouths and tell me that I lied to thee!"

As the shrill music paused the serpents' mouths fell open, almost as if they gasped for breath, and like grains of polished rice against the darkness of their gums Dirk saw the gleaming of their poison-fangs.

THE old man clapped his instrument against his mouth so quickly that it seemed the echo of his last note had not had a chance to fade, blew a final piercing-sweet lament. "*Hayah-hou!*" He cried in a cracked, quavering voice. "The dance is ended, daughters of delight!" Slowly, very slowly, like candles melting in intolerable heat, the serpents lost their rigor. They bent and swayed, lurched drunkenly, softened, wilted, became limp and flaccid, and lay upon the roof like half-deflated inner tubes, their little bead-bright eyes gone dull and lack-luster.

"My pets are tired," the old man said almost apologetically and stooped to gather up his faintly-quivering charges. "The dance sucks out their strength, protector of the bereaved."

Dirk grinned derisively at him. "Oh, yeah? Have to be the seventh son of a shiek's seventh son before they'll dance for you, huh? Gimme that pipe. I'll show you!"

He had been watching the snake charmer at his work, noting how he stopped the finger-holes as he blew in his pipe. Years

before he'd learned to play the ocaripa, and this instrument, he figured, couldn't be so very different. The old devil would come that death-defyin' bunk on him, would he? Pretend it took a special talent to make trained snakes dance to music?

He snatched the pipe from the old charmer's hand, put it to his lips, blew into it. A low, soft, liquid note came from the bulb at its base. He drew a quick, deep breath and blew into the instrument again, and his fingers fell upon the stops as if by instinct. Slowly, softly, came the purling notes of the old tune:

*De silber moon's a-shinin'  
In de hebbens up above,  
Sleep, Kaintucky Babe . . .*

"*Bism'—illah arrahman arrahim*—in the name of God the Kind and Compassionate—it is a fool's trick thou hast played, *yah Sidi!*" the old snake master chattered. "The snakes resent wrong charming—they will repay thee death for this insult!"

Already one of the spent serpents raised its head five inches from the roof, and as Dirk's music sounded softly through the gathering darkness the other two twitched irritably, like sleepers waked against their will.

"In Allah's glorious name I take refuge!" The old man seized the slowly bending bodies of his pets close to the heads and thrust them, writhing with faint rebelliousness, into his basket. "It is an evil thing that thou hast done this night my lord. The serpents have lost face by dancing to a stranger's piping. Their pride is very great, and surely they will make repayment for the jest that thou hast played on them—"

"Oh, get the hell out o' here, an' take your trick snakes with you!" Dirk reached into his trousers pocket, found a silver two franc piece and tossed it on the tiles. "Any

time you'd like to have me put 'em through their paces bring 'em round again."

Astonishingly the old man did not pounce upon the bouncing, clinking coin. "I cannot take it, *yah Sidi*. It would be blood money. *Allah ibaraq f'amur*—God have thee in His keeping." Swinging his reed-woven basket like a fisherman who lugs a heavy catch he shuffled to the stairwell, his heelless slippers slapping sorrowfully on the roof tiles.

**D**IRK woke to a quick sense of apprehension. The night had been unusually sultry and he had bidden Othman Nejim bring a mattress and silk sheet up from the house and spread them on the roof. Sleep had been a long time coming, but when it finally came it was heavy as a drugged coma. Now it seemed an eerie dream had wakened him, a dream that had to do with something heavy lying on his feet.

He moved his left foot cautiously, experimentally. It felt oddly numb and stiff, as if the circulation had been stopped by some weight imposed on his ankle, and as he shifted underneath the sheet he heard a lightly sibilating hiss, like steam escaping from a simmering kettle. In an instant to the pre-dawn chill of dying night there came the added iciness of mortal terror.

He moved his foot another fraction of an inch and the weight upon his ankle seemed to increase as it hardened like the sudden knotting of a tensed muscle. The whispered warning hiss was sharper, more insistent.

The moonlight blocked out half tones. Objects had the stark clarity of things drawn on a blackboard, and he could see the rope-like body coiled upon his legs, rocking gently to and fro as if it swayed in a light breeze. Its hood was up, its forked tongue flickered like a flash of sable light, its little, flat, hard eyes gleamed

dully in the black head like a pair of tarnished cut-steel buttons.

Horror touched the very marrow of his soul. His stomach felt stiff and empty; stark panic clawed at him, terror seemed to drug his will. His blood seethed, churning in his ears, and every hurrying, frantic pulse-beat struck his brain like a trip-hammer blow. The strokes seemed to arrange themselves in rhythmic sequence, to form words chattered in a gleeful high-pitched voice:

*The snakes resent wrong charming, yah Sidi,  
They will repay thee death for thy insult to them!*

Could it be the cobra had come back to take revenge for his silly prank—that as the old man warned no one not of the guild of snake charmers might make the serpents dance to his pipping and live to boast of it?

It had seemed fantastic—even childish—when the old snake master mouthed his admonition, but now . . .

He took the corners of the heavy silk sheet in his hands and raised them gently. Slowly—slowly. If he could make a shield of the tough fabric—let the snake drive into it . . .

With a mad, convulsive twist he drew his feet up, raised the silken rug for a screen and rolled sidewise as a streak of black lightning whipped at his throat.

The scream that stabbed the morning silence was stark terror made articulate. It rose and rose until it seemed no human throat could stand the strain of it. Then with a bubbling, choking sob it stopped abruptly.

There was no question of the cause of death. The little punctures in the neck just where the jugular comes near the surface were diagnostic of snake bite, and the report of Docteur Charles Auguste Renouard, the police surgeon who performed the



autopsy, left no room for quibbling. The toxin had spread with lightning-like rapidity, for it struck directly into the external jugular. It was undoubtedly that of the Indian cobra, *Naja tripudians*, as the advanced state of deterioration of the central nervous system and the hemolytic condition of the blood attested.

Nonmedical phases of the case are recorded in the voluminous *précis* of Etienne Hercule Jean-Baptiste Duval *brigadier de police*, who had charge of the investigation. With a corps of native gendarmes he had made a thoroughgoing search of house and garden. No place where any snake, even of the greatest smallness, could find lodgment had been overlooked.

There was no trace of any sort or kind of serpent in the house or grounds, nor even any hole where one the size of an earthworm could find a lair which they had not investigated with the most painstaking care. *Non, emphatiquement.* He, Etienne Hercule Jean-Baptiste Duval, *brigadier de police*, would personally certify to that. *Vraiment.*

How came the serpent on the housetop, and whither had it vanished when it had killed *Monsieur l'Américain* to death, then?

*Ah bah*, why put such abstruse questions to him?

After all, he was but a simple policeman, not *le bon Dieu*! But no.

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